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Casper Tribune

EPA under fire for thrice-delayed Pavillion investigation

19 hours ago • By ADAM VOGUE Star-Tribune energy reporter

Federal environmental regulators have once again lengthened their investigation into potential groundwater contamination at a west-central Wyoming natural gas field, riling the operator in the field and area landowners, who are both fed up with the delays.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday stretched to Sept. 30 the public comment period on its investigation of the natural gas field near Pavillion, its third such extension.

The agency is trying to discover if natural gas drilling and hydraulic fracturing contaminated groundwater near the town. Its draft report issued in December 2011 implicated drilling and specifically hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, in contamination it found in test wells.

The extension will allow more time for interested parties to comment on what work's already been done, the EPA said in a prepared statement. The agency will also post additional material for review and could add more to its investigation.

But those most directly affected by the investigation -- the field's operator and concerned Pavillion area residents -- say it's time for the EPA to wrap up its investigation, whatever its result.

"We don't see any reason for it. There's no credible reason to extend this," said Doug Hock, public relations officer at Encana Oil and Gas, operator of the Pavillion field. "We feel it's a disservice to us, but more importantly the people of Pavillion and the state of Wyoming."

One area landowner who believes his groundwater is contaminated agreed.

"This isn't good, for us especially," said John Fenton, chairman of Pavillion Area Concerned Citizens. "We're just going to be exposed to all this stuff that much longer and we still don't have any answers."

The announcement marks the third time the agency has extended a public comment period on the investigation, which first opened Dec. 14, 2011. The period was extended in early 2012 after the agency agreed to additional tests in the area by the U.S. Geological Survey, and again in October.

"The Agency will take into account new data, further stakeholder input, and public comment as it continues to review the status of the Pavillion investigation and considers options for moving forward," the agency said Thursday. An email to an EPA spokesman asking whether the extension affects a planned peer review panel was not returned Thursday.

The EPA began studying the area in 2010, amid claims that groundwater of area residents had been

polluted. The agency drilled two groundwater monitoring wells in the area to gauge the contamination.

In December 2011, the agency released a draft report which tentatively linked hydraulic fracturing to groundwater contamination in the natural gas field, just east of the town of Pavillion.

Environmentalists celebrated the report as proof that fracking -- a production technique in which water, sand and chemicals are pumped into a well to fracture rock and free trapped oil and gas -- harms groundwater, while industry and state officials decried the report as shoddily done and inaccurate.

The EPA called for nominations for a peer review board and public comment on the report, but later opted to re-test the wells and push back the comment period and review -- at the urging of state and industry officials, who questioned the agency's testing methods.

A new round of tests performed last summer by the U.S. Geological Survey provided new data, but only reinforced the battle lines. The EPA said the new test results were generally consistent with their own, but Encana said the data supported its own conclusions that the EPA was wrong.

The agency at an October meeting in Riverton announced the decision to extend public comment until Jan. 15. A peer review was expected to follow. The agency admitted at the same meeting that some schematics of its monitoring wells in the area were inaccurate. Discussion also centered on whether one of the EPA's two wells was of a high enough quality to produce usable data.

In December, Encana representatives called for the EPA to abandon test results from both wells and shift the focus of the investigation to domestic water wells. The agency didn't directly comment to the company's wishes.

Hock said Thursday Encana would still like to see the EPA drop its first round of test results. And until the Pavillion saga reaches its conclusion, he said the company will be adversely affected.

"This is an issue where folks are looking for answers," he said. "Our reputation is on the line. Extending it doesn't help us at all."

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